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THE COVID-19 MOBILITY IMPACTS ON THE MIGRATION FLOW IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE: THE SITUATION IN 2021 AND BEFORE 1989

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Abstract: *In this paper, we analyze the current travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic imposed by the countries from South-East Europe and briefly compare them with those imposed by the Central European countries. By using official data collection of displacement tracking matrices and analyzing the porosity of the borders in this part of Europe, we research the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility and the related economic and social aspects. Discussions are presented regarding this impact on the travelers, the seasonal workers from some of the selected countries, and the immigrants from the Middle-East. A formal analysis is performed relating the current travel restrictions and the travel ban during the iron curtain.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic; South-East Europe; Travel Restrictions; Borders; Immigration; Iron Curtain*

INTRODUCTION

Migrants are playing an important role in the contemporary economic and social sectors. On the other side, they belong to the most vulnerable population group under the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in November 2020, emigrants from the twenty countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases accounted for nearly 28% of the total international migrants (WMR 2020). They contributed to 37% of the global amount of remittances sent to their home countries in 2019 (World Bank 2020).

Nowadays, 13% of all key workers in the European Union (EU) are immigrants (Fasani 2020). Among them, there are five largest category groups formed by teaching professionals, skilled agricultural workers, science and engineering associate professionals, personal care workers, and people working in the field of cleanliness (Migration Data Portal 2020).

In general, the majority of the immigrants are exposed to higher risks as a high percentage of them are working in critical sectors of healthcare services and even more in the countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases (OECD 2019). For example, in the UK, the percentage of foreign-born doctors and nurses in the period 2015-2016 was 33% and 22% respectively. Similar is the situation in the service sector, also known for its high risk due to physical contacts. According to Migration Data Portal (2020), during the same period 2015-2016, more than 13% of all services and sales workers in seven of the twenties countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases were foreign-born. More than 9% of the agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers in five of these countries were also foreign-born. Additionally, in 2013, about 11.5 million immigrants were employed as domestic workers globally and approximately 8.5 million of them were female (ILO 2015). Due to the border closures and economic measures, the majority of them could not return to their home countries and thus they have been forced to live without any income. Similar was the situation of many immigrants, including students and seasonal workers who were not able to return. According to IOM's Return Task Force, in July 2020, there were at least 3 million stranded migrants globally (IOM 2020).

Travel restrictions increased rapidly after the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020. Their percentage in May-June 2020 was almost 75%, while in January 2021 they have decreased up to 43%. Additional displacement track matrices have been reported every week due to the very dynamic situation under pandemic measures (MTI 2020; HMI 2021; TRM 2021).

Countries with large numbers of citizens working abroad in the EU, like Romania and Bulgaria, anticipated massive repatriations of nationals (Paul 2020). According to Mantu (2020), the Covid-19 related measures adopted in the destination countries of Romanian immigrants such as Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and the UK, had a large

impact. In March 2020, Romanian authorities started to repatriate Romanians as many of them have lost their jobs and had no financial means to return home. Until May 2020, about 1,279,000 Romanians had returned. About 300,000–350,000 of them were starting to look for a job in Romania and the rest had the intention to immigrate again if possible.

Similar is the situation regarding the Bulgarian immigrants. Several thousand returned to Bulgaria and applied for a job (The Economist 2021). Social media interviews with returnees showed that the most popular reason for return was to stay with family and relatives, followed by loss of employment. Around 19% of the interviewed who had been living abroad for more than a year, said that they did not want to return to Western Europe, while 47% were undecided (Foreign Policy 2020). This return has led to an increase in unemployment from 6.2% in February 2020 to 6.5% a month later (BRM 2020; BMWSP 2020).

In this paper, we analyze the COVID-19 impact on mobility in South-East Europe, by comparing the border restrictions between Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and Croatia established on 25 January 2021. These travel restrictions are compared to those imposed by the Central European countries and to the restrictions before 1989 when Romania and Bulgaria belonged to the ex-socialist bloc and the rest of the countries, to ex-Yugoslavia.

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

A large data collection offered by IOM and focused on the Human Mobility Impact (HMI 2021) and displacement tracking matrices for each country allow researching the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility. According to these data, the situation in South-East Europe on 25 January 2021 shows relatively porous borders with several open border crossings points, entry restrictions border crossings points, and a few closed ones (TRM 2021).

Romania

Romania imposes entry restrictions on its neighbors Ukraine, Serbia, and Moldova, while there are no restrictions towards the travelers from the EU neighbors such as Bulgaria and Hungary. However, regarding the travelers coming from a country with a high epidemiological risk, a negative PCR test is required. Regarding the current travel restrictions in South-East Europe (on 25 January 2021), Romania imposes a negative PCR test for UK passengers upon arrival (Latest travel restrictions 2021). When traveling from Romania to the neighboring countries, there are no restrictions imposed from Serbia, a negative PCR test is imposed from Bulgaria and no entry is possible to

Hungary unless for Hungarian citizens or foreign travelers on the business before provide a negative PCR test or stay at quarantine.

Bulgaria

From 25 January 2021, Bulgaria imposes entry restrictions (negative PCR test) to all neighboring countries when entering, while its neighbors impose no restrictions when border crossing from Bulgaria to Romania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. Traveling from Bulgaria to Greece and Turkey is possible, but in the former case a negative PCR test and quarantine are imposed and for the latter case, a negative PCR test is required.

Serbia

All arrivals to Serbia must provide a negative PCR test performed no more than 48 hours before departure. However, these restrictions do not apply to travelers from Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. When traveling from Serbia to the neighboring countries, a negative PCR test is required from Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Montenegro and no entry is possible to Hungary unless for Hungarian citizens or foreign travelers on the business before provide a negative PCR test or stay at quarantine.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia seems to be the country with the most porous borders, compared with the rest of the South-European countries. It also belongs to the less restrictive countries for traveling (Latest travel restrictions 2021). There are no restrictions for traveling to North Macedonia from the neighboring countries, while when entering from North Macedonia to Bulgaria and Greece, a negative PCR test is required for both countries, and additionally, quarantine is required for entering Greece. There are no restrictions when entering Albania, where the measures are relatively soft, although flights from the UK are temporally banned until the end of February 2021.

Montenegro

Regarding the current travel restrictions in South-East Europe, Montenegro is requiring a negative PCR test to the travelers to the country (Latest travel restrictions 2021), while departing from Montenegro to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, a negative PCR test is required.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

On 25 January 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina impose a negative PCR test requirement upon arrival, while traveling abroad from the neighboring countries, Croatia and Montenegro require a negative PCR test and there is no restriction imposed from Serbia.

Croatia

Croatia is following the traffic light system, where only travelers from the green countries can enter without any restrictions. The country imposes entry restrictions (negative PCR test) to all the neighboring countries while traveling abroad from Croatia; negative tests are required from Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Croatia is currently belonging to the red list countries, quarantine is imposed on travelers from Croatia to Slovenia. No entry is possible to Hungary unless for Hungarian citizens or foreign travelers on the business before providing a negative PCR test or stay at quarantine. Comparing the restrictions imposed by the above South-East European countries to those imposed by the Central European countries, i.e. Germany, Austria, Slovenia, and the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary), one concludes that entry restrictions in South-East Europe are softer and mainly due to the better epidemiological situation to these countries (Worldometers 2021). Actually, by 25 January 2021, everyone entering the Czech Republic is subject to a medical examination to check for COVID-19 infection. Travelers from the EU/EEA or Switzerland need to provide a negative PCR test upon arrival in Slovakia, while those from the UK need to self-isolate and take a second PCR test. All arrivals to Poland must self-isolate for 10 days with some exceptions related to work or residency or present a negative PCR test no older than 48h. No entry is possible to Hungary unless for Hungarian citizens or foreign travelers on the business before providing a negative PCR test or stay at quarantine. The COVID-19 restrictions in Slovenia vary between municipalities according to the traffic light system. If a traveler comes to Slovenia from a 'red list' country, he is asked to quarantine for 10 days. Austria is currently in lockdown and not opens to travelers. Flights from UK, South-Africa, and Brazil are currently banned. Finally, Germany is currently in a partial lockdown. Accommodation is currently not allowed unless for business purposes only. Quarantine entry varies by region (Latest travel restrictions 2021). Due to the above-mentioned restrictions, many problems arise when traveling in Europe. Several cases of travelers have reported the forced return due to the missing of negative PCR tests although these requirements have been imposed after living in the country of origin. A recent example deals with Bulgarian travelers and seasonal workers, who have been returned from Germany because of that reason (nova 2021).

IMPACT OF THE RESTRICTIONS ON THE IMMIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

All the above comments concern not only the travelers but also the migrant who are searching for new jobs and opportunities, as well as those who are returning to their home countries. Border crossings in South-East Europe are essential for economic and social activities. An important part of them is related to the migrant's seasonal work, skilled or return migration. That is why the knowledge of the COVID-19 mobility impact in this part of Europe is important in terms of predicting the consequences of the reduced mobility on the European economy and society in general.

The pandemic has revealed the vital importance of the seasonal agricultural workers and the continuity of the food supply. Due to the restrictive border measures, the agricultural sectors in the Western European countries faced significant labor shortages. On the other side, the migrant workers, mainly from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe faced important problems related to the inability to earn abroad and to send remittances to sustain economically their families. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the remittances in 2020, compared to 2019 (Vladislavjevic 2020). For example, in Romania, they drop from 7692 in 2019 to 5954 million euros in 2020. For Bulgaria this drop in millions of euros was from 2342 (2019) to 1335 (2020) and for the rest of the countries is as follows: Serbia 4238 (2019) – 3428 (2020), North Macedonia 317 (2019) – 305 (2020), Montenegro 584 (2019) – 547 (2020), Bosnia and Herzegovina 2261 (2019) – 1607 (2020), Albania 1473 (2019) – 1386 (2020) and Croatia 4033 (2019) – 3652 (2020). When comparing the above numbers, one observes that the highest drop corresponds to Romania due to the massive immigration from the country and the massive return due to the pandemic (WBG KNOMAD 2020).

It is estimated that around 1.3 million Bulgarians live abroad, mostly in Europe and about 30% of them, who are working in Europe, are working in the agricultural sector (Chereseva 2020). Regarding the Romanian seasonal workers, only in April and May 2020, approximately 40,000 of them entered Germany. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, this number was approximately 300,000 seasonal workers per year. Germany is an important receiving country that relies on immigrants from the other EU Member States, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, to satisfy its seasonal labor needs (MPD 2020).

An analysis of the International Labour Organization (ILO), performed for Serbia, has shown that there are about 150,000 potential migrants in the country (ILO 2020S). The idea of helping a large number of returnees with incentives has been not enough developed. Similar is the situation in Montenegro, although the size of the seasonal migrants is much lower compared with the previous examples (ILO 2020M).

All the above facts show the importance of the border restrictions to the local economy of the majority of the countries from South-East Europe, which are the usual sending countries of seasonal workers in Western Europe.

It is worth also mentioning that thousands of immigrants from the Middle East face extreme problems in the countries of South-East Europe when intending to cross the borders within the region. There are currently around 9000 immigrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have been trapped within the Western Balkans with closed borders and thus living without any basic services (Infomigrants 2020a). In December 2020, fires had destroyed most of the camp in Lipa, which accommodated about 1200 people. This made the hard conditions even worse at the camp, which had neither heating nor running water. On the other side, attempts to create migrant centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina have often been met by strong resistance from local officials. The situation in some of the neighboring countries is similar. According to NGO, in Serbia, about 150 immigrants were entering daily the country from the south in the past September 2020 (Infomigrants 2020b).

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE IN NOWADAYS AND BEFORE 1989

Although there is no formal relation, the above situation remembers about the travel restrictions before the fall of the iron curtain in 1989.

As is well known, during the socialist era, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and Croatia, together with Slovenia, formed the ex-Yugoslavian federation. Following Uvalić (1992), there were some similarities between the federation and the other socialist economies. Yugoslavia had a regime that did not permit the expansion of the private sector on a larger scale and the social property was not able to provide the right incentives present in a capitalist economy. Despite these socialist elements, self-management has played an important role in the Yugoslav economy due to the economic reforms. These reforms contributed to reaching a higher level of wellbeing compared to the other socialist countries. In this way, a successful decentralized political system has been established, the borders were open for those who wanted to travel and the market did not suffer from shortages observed in the rest of the socialist bloc (Uvalić 2018). The rest of the countries, Romania and Bulgaria, did not enjoy such economic and political freedom before 1989. Bulgarians were allowed to travel only inside the socialist bloc. Special permission was necessary to travel outside, issued mainly to the members of the communist party. The situation was even worse in Romania, where people could travel only with special permission even inside the socialist bloc. On 10 November 1989, the Bulgarian communist regime fell after 45 years of rule, and Bulgarian citizens were allowed to travel again (Rangelova 2006; Markova 2010). Similar events passed after 1989 when the borders open for Romanians (Sajed

2012). The border closure for Bulgarians and Romanians during more than four decades is considered one of the reasons for the later massive migration abroad and for the loss of several hundred thousands of citizens in working and reproducible ages.

CONCLUSION


In this paper, we analyzed the current travel restrictions on 25 January 2021 in South-East Europe, due to the COVID-19 pandemic by researching several countries of the region: Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and Croatia. For this analysis, we used the official data collection of displacement tracking matrices, offered by IOM, and compared the porosity of the borders in this part of Europe, due to the COVID-19 restrictions on human mobility. Our analysis reveals that compared to other European countries, the selected region shows relatively porous borders and relaxed travel restrictions.

From the other side, if one compares the dynamics of the epidemiologic situation in the region, no excessive contagion is observed for the moment, which stimulates the corresponding relatively soft measures. Our analysis also shows that the countries with the less restricted travel measures in South-East Europe are North Macedonia and Serbia, where there are no entry restrictions in the case of North Macedonia and no PCR test is required to the majority of the neighboring countries when entering in Serbia. The rest of the countries impose entry restrictions usually referring to present a negative PCT test before arrival.

The current border situation causes important problems to the circular immigrants from these countries that travel to several western European countries. Additional tests and probes sometimes are not affordable for them. In different situations, new instantaneous measures make the travel of these immigrants impossible. Recent cases have been reported regarding travelers and season workers from South-East Europe to Central Europe, where the restrictions are usually stronger. Examples are Hungary, where no entry is possible unless for Hungarian citizens or foreign travelers on the business before providing a negative PCR test or stay at quarantine, or Austria, which is in a complete lockdown. The situation is even worse in the case of the immigrants from the Middle East, who are stuck in the Western Balkans without any economic and social support.

On the other side, the pandemic and the current travel restrictions and border closures are the main reason for the return of many immigrants from the western to their home countries. A reversal of the 'brain-drain' trend, seen more than 30 years after the fall of the socialist regime, the so-called 'brain-gain' is currently observed. It is estimated that several thousands of Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian immigrants have returned home due to the loss of their jobs in Western Europe after the beginning of the pandemic.

This phenomenon is also accompanied by a drastic fall of the remittances sent to the South-East European countries when comparing 2019 and 2020. Although some negative sites of processes, the mentioned 'brain-gain' contributes positively in several aspects for the demographic and economic development of the South-East European countries by promoting a skilled labor force and new knowledge and experiences.

Finally, we briefly discuss the formal analogy between the current travel restrictions and those before 1989, by emphasizing the difference between the open socialist regime in the former Yugoslavian federation (Yugoslav citizens could freely travel abroad since 1961) and Bulgaria and Romania, which belonged to the socialist bloc. 

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